

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Interview with Anthony Acevedo conducted by Kyra Schuster on October 13th, 2010 at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. So let's start at the very beginning. When and where were you born?

I was born in San Bernardino, California, 1924, July 31st.

OK, and can you tell me about your parents, their names and where they were from, what prompted them to come to the United States?

My mother was born in Magdalena, Sonora, Mexico. My father was born in Mexico City. That was my understanding. And they came to the United States-- my father came along but not together, since he met her with time while he was going to school. I understood he was going to school. He was learning to fly and little things like that.

OK. What were their names?

My father's named Francisco Guillermo Acevedo, and my mother was Maria Luisa Contreras.

Do you know when they got married?

I never knew what date they got married.

OK. Did they get married in California or Mexico?

I think they must have gotten married in California, but they never pursued the thing, because I was never asked.

And how many siblings? Were you the oldest child?

Myself and my sister. She was born in 1925, October the 15th, which is her birthday in just a couple of days.

And her name?

Maria Luisa.

OK, and what did your parents do for a career?

My mother was a housewife and my father, from the beginning I understood that he worked for a company, the Eljer Company then. They called it sanitation, which was mainly equipment for bathrooms, and from what I understood, he was working and then pursuing to make a career for engineering.

And as a Mexican American growing up in California, what was it like for you? At the time, how were you treated by other people?

Being born in San Bernardino, California. My mother died when I was a year and a half old, and so that left us my sister and me, and I recall when I was next to her at the time of her death. My sister was crawling all over the place and she didn't know what was happening.

So my father decided after her death to move to Pasadena, where he four years later met my other mother, my stepmother, and her name was Maria Luisa. And she was born in Durango, Mexico in the little town of Topia. And so when I lived in Pasadena, I grew up with what you call half-cousins. To me, they turned out to be more cousins than my uncle and cousins, because I didn't know my cousins very well.

What was it like growing up? Where did you go to school?

I went to school in the east side of Pasadena. They call it the Lamanda Park, and the little area was what you call a barrio viejo, a little town or village with no sidewalks, no pavement at all, and an elementary school called Fremont School where Mexican Americans could not associate with Americans at that time. So we were all Mexican-American, born in the United States, not to associate with the Americans.

Do you know why not?

Beg pardon?

Do you know why not? Were there reasons why?

We never knew. It was just a question mark that we had in our minds why we were not allowed to play or associate with them. And the most funny thing is that my teacher-- and I remember her, Mrs. Greenhoff-- her husband was the conductor Mr Greenhoff, and he turned out to be my godfather and first communion, was a very nice person even though they were teachers at that school.

So you had separate classes than the other students? The American students, you had separate classes from them?

No Americans were to associate in that school at all.

And how did that affect you as a child?

Well, it was just a question. We didn't know why until we find out that even if we went to Brookside Park up towards the Rose Bowl and we went swimming, then we were to swim in that area where only Mexican-Americans swam. And I knew that the blacks couldn't swim in our area because we weren't to associate with them, and only the whites were to swim in their area.

And how did that make you feel as a child?

Well it just felt like not wanted, but at that moment we let it pass. We didn't say nothing.

Mm-hmm. And what was the general treatment otherwise, like of your parents?

My father remained like a person incognate because he went about his own business, never thought about us or saying, well, don't worry, no nothing. Just get along. So as I started to grow up little by little, then with my half-cousins, there was Ernesto Prieto. He was the son of the aunt of my stepmother, so that was a family together.

And so we were selling papers in the corners, delivering papers to the houses, and we walked from Chihuahuita. It was called a little barrio. And we head down Colorado Street to Hill Street and get ready for New Year's Day, and sell papers for everybody. And so they use the paper, the newspapers, for pillows, or cover-up while the Rose Parade was able to start.

And did you go to church growing up?

Beg pardon?

Did you go to church?

Our church was right there at the barrio. Its name was St. Joseph Church. And with time, I found out it disappeared. That was when I left for Mexico.

So why did you go back to Mexico?

At the time-- well, it was sort of strange that my mother started to-- well, my stepmother but I call her mother-- I noticed

that she started to have somebody pack her furniture and all our furniture, and then a truck came by and picked up all that furniture. And so then we asked her, what's happening? Where you going? They said, no, we're all going. And we said, where are we going? He says, we're going to Mexico.

I said, why? Is it because we were told to leave the United States? But does my father know about it? He knows about it. My father was in Mexico and he had a good job. He graduated from engineering and became an architectural engineer, and all things that we didn't even know when we were growing. Everything was incognate.

And so at that time, by that time I was about 9 and 1/2 years old, close to 10. And where are we heading, I asked my mother. They said we're heading for Durango, Durango, Mexico. And so when we arrived in Durango, I remember that my father had a house rented out for us to live just a few days before they get a house.

And so I remember sleeping on top of that one of those big suitcases that used to travel in the big ships one time, and it was funny how we had to sleep on top of that and fall down. And kid stuff that we followed. And so I started to grow up then, and my father began to increase his title, his engineering, his business. He became well known. And it was altogether a different custom and life living in Mexico compared to in the United States.

How so?

Oh, they called me the gringo because I was born in the United States, and I know half English and half Spanish, and that was kind of difficult, but before I knew it, I had a teacher tell me, he says, I want you to help me to teach this children to speak English, and she was an English teacher. So I tag along.

And so you were going to school, and your father was now working. Where was your father working now?

My father became a Director of Public Works for the State of Durango, and so at that time as I started to grow up, it was the time when the Olympics were supposed to start, and Mexico was named the nation for the World Olympics, and so my father decided to build a big Olympic swimming pool, which was about 100 meters long by 50 meters wide with all the decorations as an Olympic swimming pool would look like with a transmitter along the side of that same pool so that people could listen to the music, and [INAUDIBLE].

So while I was going to school, we all got excited about the Olympics, but then there were two other fellas. And myself, Leo, they always called us the three musketeers. And I like to do exercise. And so I trained by looking at the books my father had of Charles Atlas, well known then. And every morning, we used to-- all these fellows would come over and pick me up. And we'd go swimming at the swimming pool, 5:00 in the morning. And then about 7:00, we head back to school.

This time, it was about-- the war had started-- the '40s, 1940. And Corolla, Antonio Corolla, was my friend. He was the son of a diplomat, Congressman. And Jose Blanco, Pepe Blanco, they'd call him Pepe, he was the nephew of a railroad conductor.

Which, knew the Morse code very well. So we went out swimming. And Pepe Blanco says, Atlas, Atlas, there's a spy going on. I said, why, why do you know? W were very low voiced. Because we would hear music in the distance. And that was from the transmitter.

And he says that there's a Morse code going on. And there are submarines in Baja, California, connected with the people. And I said, but, how? How do you know? Yeah, I hear [IMITATING MORSE CODE]. So I said, we'd better get to your father.

So we decided-- we dashed out out of that swimming pool. And we headed back to school. And they went to school. And I went to his office, my father's office. And I knocked quick at the door of his office. And I told him about the situation.

And soon, before you knew it, he had them arrested. And sure enough, they were spying for the Nazis, Germany. Well, I

realized then that we had a German colony in Mexico. And here, I was associated well with a group of fellows, the Boy Scouts. We had formed a boy scout group. And our scout master, Boy Scout Master, was the Schrader, a Schrader family that owned a hardware store there in Durango.

And so by that time, I was 17 and 1/2 years old. And then the consul general of the United States was after me because of my age and get ready to go back in the United States and serve your country. Yes, sir. He was a very good friend. He was a very nice friend of ours.

And so I said goodbye to my parents. And my mother prepared me [SPANISH] She took my coat pocket, \$200, put a safety pin on it. She said, this is that nobody can steal it from you. Use it when you can. Yeah, but how am I going to take it off of there? It's secured.

Always funny things that one asks. But anyway, I hid it. I said goodbye to my parents. And I took the train from Durango to the city of Torreón. I transferred over to another train. And at that time, I didn't know the traveling situation. Because I never travel.

And I had my little satchel with me and little suitcase. And I heard somebody say, [WHISPERING], just sort of whistling at me through the window the other coach train. And I went up. And he says, give it to me. He say, I have a seat here for you.

So we made friends. And we became friends until a year later. But I'll tell the story about that. I said goodbye to him. Because he wants to meet his sister there in Juarez across the border. And I headed to Pasadena, Back to my cousin's.

And that's where I headed for induction the following day. And then the head of the induction center said that I need another semester of school. And I said, why? I said, well, we don't evaluate-- what you went through in your school is not enough. I said I went to school in 7:00 in the morning till 6:00 in the evening, isn't that enough?

And I says they teach us very much over there, more than they teach you here. I couldn't say any more. He says, but you need one semester. So I went to Pasadena City College. And I took a course. And I passed by three-month certification. And I got my diploma.

And I'm in the army. So before I knew it, I was in Oregon, in Camp Adair, Oregon. We call it Swamp Adair. Because it was full of swamps. And then I was transferred. I had the special letters that my father had given me as the introduction showing that my efforts was to want to be a doctor.

And so before I knew it, I was transferred from the infantry to go to medical school.

Did you know what was going on in Europe with the situation with the Jews or what was happening at all during the war? Were you aware of any of that?

Until then, little by little, I started to pick up about Germany, and the spies of what's going on. and the frustrations of what was happening. And yet, they kept us to be alert. So they sent me to the medical school. I went for 4 and 1/2 months and gave a study for, if I recall it, almost for a year study.

And I graduated. And I headed back to my outfit. And before you knew it, I we're all heading for Europe. That's when-- I was going to-- well, I'm not going to go into details. Because it's just a [INAUDIBLE]. But if you want me to, I--

If you don't mind, whatever you feel comfortable with.

OK. We went in the West Point transatlantic. And that held almost a complete division.

What division?

At West Point.

What division were you in?

The 70th Infantry Division.

OK.

And I was assigned to the 275th medical detachment as a medic.

Mm-hmm.

And we headed from New Jersey, Camp Davis, New Jersey, to Marseilles, France. And I couldn't stand the waves at all. And I had to lie down for 13 days in a cot eating nothing but Ritz Crackers. Because I couldn't stand the-- I got dizzy very easy.

So then we landed in Marseilles. And we stayed there for about two, three days. And I had a friend of mine, he was Jewish.

What's his name?

His name was Murray Pruzan. I always kept in touch with his parents. And he was a medic, also. And that night, we're bivouacking. And he says, this is Anthony. By that time, they never call me Tony. They call me Anthony.

And he says, I don't think I'm going to make it. He says, I'm going to die. I said, Murray, don't speak like that. You should pray. Have faith. No, no, no, I have a feeling I'm going to die. I said Murray, don't say that. But anyway, I changed his mind by talking other things.

Then two days later, we headed for Lyon, France. And we were divided. He was assigned to a group. And I was assigned to another group, and Company B, and he was assigned to a Company A something. But anyway, we went to battle. And on my assignment, I headed with Company B on a special assignment.

And I just followed. I carried my duffel bag and all my equipment with me. And everybody used to laugh at me, and yell at me, and say, Anthony, drop that, drop all that stuff. They says, they're going to kill you! You're a sore thumb! I said, no, that's going to save my life.

And so we headed to their assignment and what they had to do. And I just followed. And as we were heading back, they finished what they had to do, the battalion. And we were marching towards a ridge. And there was a dike down below. And I heard an echo, medic, medic. Because there were machine guns going on back and forth.

And I was carrying my stuff with me. And then-- so finally, I picked up the sound. And I started to head down the hill. And as I was heading down the hill, I tripped on some branches. And when I tripped over those branches, then I saw up ahead a cave with the Germans. Well, there were about six Germans in that with machine guns.

And those machine guns were the umpteenth-- just, you thought you were thousands of them. But it turned out to be that those machine guns [IMITATING MACHINE GUN FIRE]. And at that time, when they started shooting at me, my stuff went up in the air. My duffel bag and everything just turned open into a sieve.

My other boots went ping pong here and then so on, so forth. I fell on the ground. And I crawled to my helmet. And before I knew it, I was with the fellas that were wounded. So by that time, they had control of the Germans. And so I was doing repair jobs, first aid, sutures, and sewing thumbs, cutting the leg off, and putting a tourniquet, and sewing up the leg, that stump, doing this and that, so forth, as a medic.

So finally, we all started to head back. And they help me with the wounded. And as we were heading back, our scout said that we couldn't get back to Philipsburg. And so we decided-- he said, move over to that hill. And so we went up to

the hill.

And there, I saw Murray Pruzan dead. He had been killed. He tried to save-- well, he did save our Captain Commander's life. He had severe wounds. And he was unconscious. But Murray was cut in half by machine guns. I lost my friend.

And at that time, it was just like saying, all hell broke loose there on that hill. And we were there from the-- oh, fifth days before Christmas until the 2nd of-- the 2nd of January. And we were selected to be captured.

And this was during the Battle of the Bulge?

Yeah, it was the Battle of the Bulge.

And do you remember the name of the hill that you were on?

Falkenberg Hill.

OK.

And that's when the Germans came up the hill. And we had to surrender. And we tried to destroy everything that we could carry. I carried my first aid, everything, equipment with me as much as I could to help the sick. When the Germans took us, they forced us to get my shoes off, our boots off, walk down the slope barefooted in the snow, and march for about almost a mile to the trucks.

Let's pause tape for a second.

Excuse me. One second. Oh.

Let me know when we're rolling please. Stand by to slate. Go ahead, Kyra.

This is a continuation of a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Anthony Acevedo. OK, so we're going to go back a little bit. And I want you to tell me, you were in Lyon, and you're 19 years old, and it's your first time ever experiencing anything like this. So how did you get from Lyon to Belgium? And let's start there.

From Lyon, for the first time, we took a train to head for Philipsburg.

What country was that in?

A little town, a little village, of Philipsburg, up towards the front of the Maginot Line and the Sippic Line.

OK.

And at that time, when we took the train, an experience was that all the fellows say, oh, you know what, is that, we need some wine, I said, oh, no, the expression that you get sometimes that now they want to drink, they said, to lose their fears. No, thank you.

But smell this. And they call it schnapps. And I said, well, it smells like turpentine that you wash your hands from after you finish painting, ooh. That's better than what vodka. I says, I don't drink that.

I didn't get [? the importance ?]. But that the fellows starting to feel that they wanted to feel a little numbness from the fear. And we got to Philipsburg. And it turned out to be a wire factory.

I'm sorry, what country was Philipsburg in?

It's a little town of France and Germany that-- it has a highway. And they used to call it the corner 80. I don't know why

they used that term. But anyway, that was Philipsburg. And from Philipsburg to Falkenberg was just a few kilometers to where that hill was?

And that was in Belgium?

No, France.

In France.

France.

OK.

At the time that we were going to do our up front, I hear somebody call me, medic, medic. And I turned around and headed to the fellow. And they says, what do you want? I says, I'm afraid. I don't want to go.

Was this during the battle?

The battle.

What was going on around you?

We were going to head back to-- I mean, we were going to head up the front towards the battle. And he wanted-- he was afraid to face the battle. And so I had to tag him and call him as a casualty.

Do you remember his name?

No, I don't remember his name. At that time, there were fellows where you to-- or they commit suicide. And had to sign a card where he heads back to the medical corps and called the casualty. Or he would commit suicide or shoot at everybody.

At the Americans, or his colleagues?

American American. Or they would be fellows that they were afraid. And they started to lose that feeling of want to do something. And yet, they cannot do anything at all. Because they couldn't think anymore. And they said, could you baptize me?

I says, don't know how to pray. I'm afraid. And so I would more or less remind them a prayer or whatever. I says-- I'd ask them what religion. No religion. They had no faith. And they weren't taught to have faith. And so these were fellows that you'd come across.

What faith where you?

Beg your pardon?

What religion were you?

Catholic.

Catholic. Did you have a prayer book with you? Or how did you help them pray?

I had my prayer book with me. And I would use some phrases that wouldn't be too long but enough for that person, that soldier, to motivate him, make him feel motivated, and feel free of fear. And that's what he was. He was afraid.

So you weren't just a medic. You were their chaplain.

I had to use that template. We have the rights to do that for the purpose of trying to save lives.

How did that make you feel?

It made me feel more open, more relaxed, a faith more strong. And that's what gave me-- invigorated me not to be afraid.

So how did you feel going into battle? And what did you see around you?

We had had question marks in up here. And I said, God, help me. And there I go with the rest of them. And I'm in your hands.

Mm-hmm. And what was it like the first few days going into battle? What did you see?

Afraid that at any moment a German was going to shoot in where or what direction. Because when I-- at that time, when I had turn over that fellow, a sergeant asked the captain, what are we going to do with these Germans?

They had captured about 30, 40 of them. And they had them out by that wire factory, to the side of the wire factory. And so the sergeant went over and said, Captain, what do we do them? Take care of them.

This was taking care of the Germans.

Take care of the Germans. Well, you can use the terminology in two ways. Take care of them by guard them, don't do anything to them because they're prisoners, or shoot them. Well that was incorrect. He shot them, all of them.

The American?

And that gave me a feeling of, why did they have to shoot them since they were already in our hands with no equipment? And they were not endangering our lives. A prisoner of war is a prisoner of war.

Did you see the shooting take place?

I submitted that report.

Mm-hmm.

That was wrong. But they did that.

Were there any repercussions for that American.

I never knew. I never knew. But that was one of the cases where it kept me in my mind. And so that was, at the time, before heading out with my duffel bag and everything. And so when I was up in that hill and took care of the fellas, first aid.

I was going to say, how did you take care of the fellows? Because you were now up on Falkenberg Hill.

I'm now back on Falkenberg Hill.

And you were ordered-- your whole unit was ordered to go up there.

The whole--

How did you end up on the hill?

When the machine gunning-- when we finished our assignment, when my duffel bag bursted up into flames, and then--

Where was that?

That was before getting to Falkenberg. We were heading back. And the assignment that the group had been assigned to do away with, annihilate, certain pillboxes that there were Germans.

What are pillboxes?

That's where Germans had equipment, the secret equipment, missiles, or buzz bombs, that they were shooting. And so us medics didn't know what was then, what they were doing, what were the assignments. It was secret. And us medics would just take care of the sick and the wounded.

So that was when, upon heading back, they had finished the assignment. And that was heading back. And when I heard the sound effects of, medic, medic, and you find the echo from all sides in the dikes. And the echoes just travel in the forests.

And there was snow up to your waist. So your voice gets to hear you say a word here. And it echos over there.

And where were you during this?

I was on top of the ridge. We're marching to head back to the wire factory.

And what town was the wire factory?

Philipsburg.

OK.

And so that's when my-- when I headed down the slope, I tripped on the branches. And I tripped, my duffel bag went up in the air. And as it went up in the air, the machine guns started. And they were firing at me. And so I fell on the ground. And I crawled into my helmet. And then I crawled to where my fellows were.

And so I started to give them first aid and fix-- and there were fellows that had a leg blown up. And so I to do my first-aid tourniquets, sew it up, and cut it off.

How did that make you feel? Was that the first time you had to do something like that?

I had experience learning is, if you want to be a doctor, you have to do what you have to do.

Mm-hmm.

And I did it with all my heart and feeling that young fellows, the same, my age, do die. But fear nothing, and injected him with morphine to prevent the pain. And repair that wound. But a thumb blown off, fix it up, whatever you can, do it to stop the bleeding. Wounds, everything, and fears of everything, you have to keep the morale going.

Mm-hmm. And how was it for you? You know, you've grown up in Mexico. And now you're in this foreign country. And what was that like for you? Was this totally different from-- I mean, you'd never experienced anything like this. How were you feeling at that time?

To me, when I left Mexico, I wasn't too happy living in Mexico. Because I was used to my being in good-old Pasadena. That's where I wanted to be all the time. Because if I turn back a little bit over there living in Pasadena, my cousin and I

would have a little scraper. We'd buy ice, big cubes of ice, and scrape it, and then fill it up in a cup, and soak it with the Kool-Aid flavors, and sell it for \$0.03 a cup going down the road, house by house.

And that's how we-- and every penny, whatever penny we made, we'd give it to my mother. And it's part of our lives. So things like that motivated you, doing things that you're not supposed to do.

So thinking about your family, remembering home, helped you a lot?

Yeah.

Yeah. So what happened after this incident? You were now-- your unit was heading towards-- was charged to head towards Falkenberg?

We heard-- well, we were up there in Falkenberg. Then I saw I saw Murray Pruzan. And I had lost my buddy. And Captain Schmitt was very seriously wounded. He was unconscious. And so I did what I can to continue on part of what Murray had left, he wasn't able to complete when he was wounded or killed. And the same thing I did with the other fellows that needed wounds that were the conditions that us medics had to do.

How did it make you feel when you came across Murray, when you found him?

Well, it's funny. I prayed for him, that God had taken him. And I said, I told you, Murray, I told you not to fear, that you were going to survive. That's all I had to-- I couldn't do anything else but to pray for him because his soul had been taken. And he was a very kind person, very docile type.

So we headed back down the hill. They forced us to take your shoes off.

Wait, I want to go back. I'm sorry.

OK.

So you were-- how long were you on the hill before the Germans came?

It was until January the 6th, when the Germans took us, captured us.

Were you fighting during that time? Were you holding them off? What were you and the guys doing?

I wasn't in the hill very long. Because the hill had been occupied by our company, Company B. And we hadn't had any information about it until when we were heading back towards Philipsburg, when the scout informed us that we couldn't go because the Germans had taken Falkenberg-- I mean had taken Philipsburg, the wire factory, and that to head for Falkenberg.

And so, when we were headed up there, that we had to entrench ourselves, and dig in, and make our own foxholes until whatever happened. Because our planes were protecting the area, preventing the Germans to go up the hill. But it turned out too late. Because we ran out of ammunition.

And then the Germans had more control of the area. And we couldn't do it anymore. Our buddies couldn't do it anymore. Because they ran out of ammunition.

I'm sorry, did you know what the other units in the area were doing? Or you guys were completely on your own?

We were on our own, like Company C, Company K. They were all farther away from the areas.

So what did your guys do when they ran out of ammunition?

That's when we gave up. We started destroying our equipment. Well, they started to destroy their equipment. Because we-- us medics--

The Americans did, the infantry.

Medics couldn't use firearms. And all our infantry destroyed the machine guns and dug all the ammunition, destroy it, dug it, and then buried it.

Why did they do that?

To prevent the Germans from getting control of it.

OK. And after they did all of that, did you have food? How did take care of yourself?

We ran out of food. We had no food. As a matter of fact, I remember that I was in a foxhole. And that was the last moment. And I had my last little K-ration was a chocolate bar. And I fell asleep. And the Russian [INAUDIBLE] was still hungry. So he stole it from me.

There were Russians with you?

They were a white Russian that our outfit had captured.

OK. And--

But we didn't punish him.

So you were all in foxholes? Or how did you--

In foxholes.

OK.

We were in foxholes.

And how long were you there?

From that foxhole, from the 1st of January to the 6th. That was when we were told to head for--

So who told you to surrender?

The scout.

The American-- your--

The American scout. When the Americans scout-- we were heading back after the battle, that we did away with the Germans down the hill, when I fell down?

Right.

OK. We headed back. And as we heading back to Falkenberg-- I mean, to the Philipsburg, the scout said-- we bumped into him. And he told us to head to Falkenberg.

But you are bunkered down on the hill? You were stuck there for a week, you said? Or--

From the 2nd of January until the 6th.

And it was the American. One of your guys in charge gave you the order to finally surrender.

Yeah, yes.

So what happened? The Germans-- what happened after you surrendered?

Well, one of our lieutenants, acting as a commander, took over.

Do you remember his name?

No.

OK.

I had him, the name. But it's been so long.

That's OK.

OK. It's hard to remember the names. As a matter of fact, later, I'll tell you about him.

Which one? The one in charge?

Yeah.

OK.

And he decided to-- we'll have to surrender. We'll have to give up everything. He says, destroys everything you have as equipment, firearms and everything. And so dig holes and bury the ammunition. And so I'll come out with a flag, white flag. The Germans start coming up the hill. And that's when we surrender.

How did you feel at that moment?

Bad, it felt bad. Yet there was no other thing to do but save our lives and save the wounded. And so the Germans took us. We had to take our shoes off. And the snow was up to our waist, the coldest winter in 100 years, pretty close to 50 degrees below 0.

And headed back. We headed towards the trucks.

Why did they make you take your shoes off?

Prevent us from escaping. We headed for the trucks. And then took us to Bad Orb, Stalag IX-B.

Where is that?

[INAUDIBLE]

It's near Frankfurt.

OK, hold on.

Let's pause tape please. We're almost to the end of this one.